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A LOOK AT BOOK REPORTS.

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BOOK REPORT ASSIGNMENTS SHOULD BE PART OF A CAREFULLY PLANNED READING PROGRAM TO MOTIVATE STUDENT INTEREST IN LITERATURE. GOOD READING PROGRAMS CAN BE CREATED BY--(1) ASSESSING STUDENT NEEDS, INTERESTS, AND REGIONAL BACKGROUND, (2) APPRAISING THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT'S READING ABILITY AND THE AMOUNT OF OUTSIDE READING REQUIRED IN OTHER COURSES, (3) PLANNING A SEQUENTIAL READING PROGRAM WHICH MOVES FROM UNSOPHISTICATED QUESTIONS TO MORE COMPLEX LITERARY PROBLEMS, (4) SPENDING CLASS TIME IN READING AND DISCUSSING ASSIGNED BOOKS, (5) PHRASING THOUGHT-PROVOKING QUESTIONS TAILORED TO THE REQUIREMENTS OF EACH BOOK, (6) ESTABLISHING A CLASSROOM PAPERBACK LIBRARY, (7) CREATING A SUMMER READING PROGRAM, (8) ASSIGNING TO SLOW LEARNERS BOOKS WHICH MOTIVATE THEM TO WANT TO READ, REQUIRING WRITTEN REPORTS OF ONLY A PARAGRAPH IN LENGTH, (9) ENCOURAGING ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO "SHARE" BOOKS ALOUD RATHER THAN TO WRITE REPORTS, A PRACTICE WHICH OFTEN STIFLES THE INTEREST GENERATED BY THE BOOKS. IN ADDITION, THE TEACHER'S OWN READING, KNOWLEDGE, ENTHUSIASM, AND IMAGINATION IN TALKING ABOUT BOOKS WILL PROVE CONTAGIOUS. (APPENDICES INCLUDE SAMPLE APPROACHES TO BOOK REPORTS, THEMES FOR GROUPING LITERATURE, AND A DISCUSSION OF THE BOOK REPORT IN MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGE, SOCIAL STUDIES, AND SCIENCE PROGRAMS.) (JB)

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A LOOK AT BOOK REPORTS

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A LOOK AT BOOK REPORTS

RICHARD L. KNUDSON
State English Supervisor

English teachers, administrators, parents, and even students are in agreement that book reports are necessary. However, there aren't very many of these people able to agree about such things as type or number.

Many English teachers pass out an extensive list of books in the fall and tell their students that they must read and report on a number of books. Too often this list is merely a list of books the teacher has read. It might even be a list the teacher received when he was a college student. Perhaps the list came from an article in one of the slick magazines about the books one should read before he dies. The point here is that the list has not been written with the students in mind. Lists should be devised considering the particular students and where they live. For example: I'm sure most Maine reading lists include Kenneth Roberts, but how many include Ruth Moore, Bill Geagan, or E. W. Smith?

The trend in book reports and reading lists is toward a *GUIDED READING PROGRAM*. The teacher must consider his students. If he has never had them before, he'll have to wait before passing out his reading list. He will have to consider their interests and needs. The needs of the student refer to his future and the building of a background in order to attain his goals. When one hears such terms as "interests" and "needs" one is tempted to think that the speaker is being idealistic. But I submit that the teacher who demands that all of his students who are employment bound read *The Return of the Native* is really idealistic. Not only will these students dislike the book which has little meaning for them, but also they may develop a strong dislike for all reading. For a check upon your reading requirements, ask your students when they last read a book for pleasure.

English Departments could develop sequential programs in the various areas within the subject. Certainly there are skills in the reading of literature that range from the unsophisticated to the highly sophisticated such as symbolism. The teacher should consider these skills and concepts when developing his list and designing book report assignments. The junior high school and lower grades could concentrate on setting, action, and some character judgment, leaving allusion, symbolism, and other literary concepts for later.

Teachers are concerned with how many book reports should be given. Here in Maine, I have talked with some teachers who assign one a week and with others who assign four a year. Most agree that these are probably the minimum and the maximum but neither is realistic. The National Study of High School English Programs carried out by the University of Illinois took some competent professionals into 168 schools in every state. They talked with administrators, teachers, and students in making the study. As one might imagine, some amazing information came out of talks with students. They found out (from students of all grade levels and abilities) that the average number of books the students obtained per month was nine. This doesn't actually say that students read them, but they did handle that many. With this in mind, the *basic minimum* suggested by the *Recommended Course Content in English* does not seem out of reason. The number of reports it recommended for a year follows:

Grades	Track I	Track II	Track III
7	10	8	4
8	10	8	4
9	10	8	6
10	12	8	6
11	12	9	6
12	12	10	6

It should be noted that teachers in the other content areas will be requiring outside reading in their courses. The reading of these books, especially those of technical material, certainly takes time. Happily, these assignments also develop skills important to the English curriculum. The English teacher should be aware of how much the other teachers are requiring in order to make assignments realistically. See Appendix C for comments on outside reading assignments from specialists in other areas.

The question is often asked, "How can book reports be made more interesting?" The key to any motivation is real teacher enthusiasm and *variety*. Book reports don't have to be "the same old thing." Each one can be different and stimulating. Try designing reports around more than one book so the students can see that literary principles apply to more than one book. Students shouldn't read a book and forget it. They should be encouraged to compare characters and events. The teacher should put a great deal of thought into each assignment. The written report must fit the book. A report designed to work with a war novel probably will not work with a biography. The idea of

passing out a book report form in September to be used the rest of the year certainly can't be called imaginative teaching. Some sample book report ideas appear in Appendix A and a theme approach is found in Appendix B.

Students need guidance and instruction in their reading. Too often they just read the words. Intelligent questioning in the book report assignment will certainly be a great aid in the students' development. If book reports are as important as we have been claiming for so many years, then much individual help is necessary. One might wonder when to give this help. Again, if these reports are as necessary as we think, then class time would be appropriate; one or even two class periods per week could be used for this purpose. With the class reading, the teacher could use the time for working with individuals or with groups reading the same book. The teacher could also use this time for individual work in composition. With the use of class time, requirements could be increased. An added comment on subtle motivation is appropriate here: the placement of a substantial classroom library has proved to motivate reading through accessibility and has not decreased the central library's circulation. This classroom library would probably consist of paperbacks and should be located conveniently.

Studies show that almost fifty percent of class time in English is spent in the study of literature. How successful are we? Do students graduate from high school as avid readers or as television devotees? Are we individualizing our teaching in order to make it interesting? Are we teaching for us or for the children?

Some Thoughts on Book Reports for the Slow Learner

All students expect to do book reports — even the slow learners. In fact, they will quite often feel cheated if they aren't asked to do them. The question is, what kind of reports are of use to them?

We would all agree that these students will be living in an oral world. Their work and their leisure will be occupied very little with the written word. Yet, it seems we have a duty to acquaint them with the pleasure of reading.

It must be that all of us find reading a pleasure, and we might find it difficult to realize that some people dislike reading. If we were to sit down with a book such as *Jack Jones, Hockey Coach*, we might find ourselves disliking it. We might say that it's not our style. It's

not difficult to understand why our Track III people can't become enthusiastic about *The House of Seven Gables.* It just isn't their style.

What, then, is their style? You, the teacher, will have to discover this as you get to know your pupils. It would be impossible to devise a master list which would fit all students in Maine. Youngsters in rural areas might enjoy hunting and fishing stories more than some students living in the cities. Teachers should make themselves aware of the books available and be able to recommend them when asked. If a student wants a book on cars, the teacher should be able to name four or five. Better yet, he should be able to pick up four or five from the shelf of his well-stocked classroom library and hand them to the student.

After the student has the book and has read it, what then? How does he report on it? Long reports, written out-of-class, would be virtually worthless. If done at all, they would destroy all the child received from the book. Why not a short paper of one or two paragraphs written in class about a teacher-designed question which would give students a chance to show that they had learned something from the book?

Class time for silent reading can do wonders for this group, too. It will give the teacher an opportunity to work with individuals and with small groups. In a school without a special reading teacher, this would be an excellent time for individual help in strengthening reading skills.

These students want desperately to be the same as the other students. They are in school to learn — to read. A teacher shouldn't drive them from this desire with assignments given from the top of his head. By keeping the students' interests in mind always, perhaps some of the students will become readers and thinkers.

Summer Reading

American education has been criticized for being behind — for not doing enough. With this in mind, many educators have decided that education can be upgraded if more work is assigned. English has come under this kind of thinking, and the area of book reports has been a popular target. Summer book reports have come into vogue with this "more work" trend.

Summer reading is great. Any English teacher feels successful when his students read in the summer. It should be a prime task of any English teacher to motivate his students to wide reading in the summer. Actually, voluntary summer reading by students is the best proof

of the effectiveness of the literature program. However, to require a set number of books over a summer vacation with written reports is not going to instill any love for reading. Too often, teachers worry about how they are going to check on a student to see if he has read a book. To be frank, the book report is probably the easiest assignment for a student not to do. If a school system required a certain number of books to be read in the summer, consideration should be given to not requiring the completion of a formal report. The important thing is reading the book. No doubt, most students will feel honor-bound to complete the assignment.

If a class were motivated properly, the students might read quite a few books in the course of a summer without any specific assignment. Of course, motivation is an easy word to toss around. Generally, summer reading applies to college bound youngsters. Showing them how they can bring a wide reading background into all of their writing will encourage them to read. A two-day blitz at the end of the year where the students would be exposed to many titles and plot summaries might help. One important source of motivation would be a highly interested teacher.

Many community librarians would like to be involved in a summer reading program. Some are participating already. Cooperative effort of the school and the library is good public relations.

The English Teacher's Reading

Teachers want their students to have an enthusiasm for reading and to share their reading with the rest of the class in various kinds of reports. This genuine enthusiasm of the students will be proportional to the teacher's own reading enthusiasm and his method of reporting. In order to do the job professionally, the teacher must be not only well-grounded in the literary tradition but also knowledgeable in contemporary literature. The interesting and interested teacher will keep his class informed on his personal reading.

No one has time to read all the books being published. Teachers should feel an obligation to know what is being published, which can be done by reading book reviews. There are several magazines devoted to this. The English teacher should read one of them regularly for the purpose of keeping himself and his classes informed.

Teachers often feel students are not being entirely honest if they claim they don't have enough time to read. Yet, teachers will use this

excuse themselves. We certainly can't talk about minimums and maximums with teacher reading any more than we can with student reading, but the English teacher needs to be continually reading or as one writer put it, "with book".

Book Sharing in the Elementary School

Probably the biggest advantage in having book reports in the elementary school is that the students come to realize that there is some thinking to do while reading a book — this thinking can be guided by thoughtful book report assignments. I recently heard Jane O. Page of York refer to these assignments as book sharing. The idea of sharing one's ideas about a book might be easier to sell than a traditional book report.

Perhaps the biggest danger in assigning book reports too early and too often in the elementary school is that the students will feel they have to "do something" for each book read. This having to "do something" could quickly eliminate any desire to read the youngsters might have had.

Here are some ideas that would interest elementary school youngsters:

1. A cumulative report on the same book. As a child finishes the book, he writes his observations down and adds it to a folder kept in the classroom for that particular book. With this method, the child has a chance to see what the others have thought about this book. As soon as a number of students have read the book, an oral buzz session might be in order.

2. Some girls would be interested in designing clothes for paper dolls. This would be a good device for the students to do some visualizing of a high order.

3. After finishing a book a child writes a letter to the librarian in which he tells her what to tell boys and girls who ask about the book.

4. A student could make a simple costume and assume the role of one of the book's characters. He would then tell the story in the first person.

5. A group of students could prepare a bulletin board about a book they have read.

6. Primary grade youngsters would be interesed in making up riddles about characters in a book they had read. It would probably be a good idea to try some of these in a reading group.

7. Teachers always must be alert to the youngster who has become enthusiastic about a book. This excitement over a book is quite often contagious and should be capitalized upon when it occurs. We all are aware of the weight the opinion of a peer has — one happy child can do more for outside reading than any four teachers.

8. In the upper elementary grades, some books lend themselves to the possibility of constructing a time line. This time line would be a simple graphic representation of the chronological events in the story. This would be a good crutch for the hesitant book sharer.

Appendix A

Some Sample Book Reports

I. Biography

Assign the reading of four biographies about:

1. a scientist
2. a statesman
3. an artist
4. a theologian

Discuss:

1. How did conformity and/or non-conformity aid these people?
2. How were these people helped by others?
3. Explain how education helped these people.
4. What problems do you have in common with these people?
5. It has been said that biography is the most difficult art. Discuss — be sure to refer to the four books you have read.

II. Historical

Assign the reading of three books about a ten year period in our history. Most students will pick a war period, but this is not necessary.

Discuss:

1. From information gathered from your reading, make some observations about the society of the time.
2. Comment on the historical accuracy of these books.
3. It has been said that history is written, not made. Do you agree? Discuss — be sure to refer to the books you have read for this report.
4. Discuss some of the crises in the books. How were they solved? Do you feel that an unexplainable force (God, luck, etc.) entered into the picture anywhere? Discuss.
5. Explain any historical events which were made clearer by your reading.

III. Novel

Assign the reading of a novel. Have the students construct an examination over this book containing:

1. Ten T & F questions.
2. Ten multiple choice questions.

3. Ten matching.
4. One essay.

Have each student pass in an answer sheet with his exam.

IV. Group Report (Example)

With a class of twenty sophomores, divide them into four groups. Assign the following novels:

1. *Hiroshima*
2. *The Old Man and the Sea*
3. *The Pearl*
4. *Ethan Frome*

All students must read all of the books. Each group is given one class period in which they must make a creative presentation of their book. Group one, for example, would report on *Hiroshima*. By having all of the students read all of the books, the class discussions can be much more interesting. Presentations will range from panel discussions to takeoffs on television shows. Properly motivated, this report can be highly enjoyable.

V. Novel

Assign the reading of a novel. Have the student assume he is the producer, director, and screen writer and that he is going to make a motion picture out of this book. Have him answer the following:

1. What would you choose for a location for filming?
2. What scene in the book would be impossible or most difficult to shoot?
3. Cast the film. Please do not have any of the undesirables local people. Explain your choice.
4. Write the script for one scene.

Appendix B

Themes For Reading

Some examples of human attitudes, problems, and situations which people share in different plays and novels and in our own life experience.

Idealistic person who lives in the midst of the world's activity

Anouilh's *Antigone*, Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Shaw's *Saint Joan*, Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, Howard's *Yellow Jack*.

Hopes and illusions that drive people

O'Neill's *Beyond the Horizon* and *Desire Under the Elms*, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*.

Meeting and accepting a new idea

Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Landon's *Anna and the King of Siam*.

The need to belong to something outside of one's self

McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding*, O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, Brown's *A Sound of Hunting*, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

Courage in standing up for one's beliefs

Melville's *Billy Budd*, (or the play by Coxe and Chapman), Sherwood's *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, Hersey's *A Bell for Adano*, Moon's *Without Magnolias*.

Our reaction to unfair authority

Nordoff and Hall's *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Monserrat's *The Cruel Sea*, Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny*, Walpole's *Fortitude*, Dickens' *David Copperfield*.

Working for a goal: What achieving it or failing may do to a person

Ulman's *The White Tower*, Lewis' *Arrowsmith* and *Main Street*, Curie's *Madame Curie*.

The person who removes himself from society: Why does he do it:

Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, Stone's *Lust for Life*, Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence*.

The search for a faith

Bowen's *The Weight of the Cross*, Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, Mann's *The Holy Sinner*, Shaw's *Saint Joan*.

Man's endurance and fortitude when he has a purpose

Wright's *Black Boy*, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

People's reaction to war over the world and through the years

The Trojan Women, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage,* Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front,* Dos Passos' *Three Soldiers,* the writings of Tom Paine, Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny,* Simonov's *Days and Nights,* Boyer's *The Secret Game,* Coward's *In Which We Serve.*

How we develop an objective in life

Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise,* Maugham's *Of Human Bondage,* Aldrich's *A Lantern in Her Hand.*

People at odds with their environment

Wharton's *The Age of Innocence,* Michener's *Tales of the South Pacific,* Lewis' *Main Street,* Phillips' *Search for a Hero.*

The role of the scientist in the modern world

Amrine's *Secret,* Lewis' *Arrowsmith,* Hobert's *The Serpent Wreathed Staff,* Cronin's *Adventures in Two Worlds* and *The Citadel.*

Overcoming ignorance and prejudice

Shute's *The Chequerboard,* Wright's *Black Boy,* Graham's *Earth and High Heaven,* Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement.*

The lust for power

Warren's *All the King's Men, A Lion in the Streets,* Shakespeare's *Coriolanus.*

How people react to danger

Brickhill's *The Great Escape, The Wooden Horse,* Browne's *The Weight of the Cross,* White's *They Were Expendable,* Vorhee's *Korean Tales.*

Based on list from
Germantown Friends School
Germantown, Pennsylvania

Appendix C

The Book Report In Modern Foreign Language Instruction

EDWARD BOOTH, *State Supervisor of Modern Foreign Languages*

The book report may play a fairly important role in modern foreign language instruction. In elementary level courses, fictional and non-fictional works in English dealing with the country under study can give students an insight into the foreign culture. In advanced courses, books in the foreign language not only further reading comprehension but also develop more fully the students' understanding of the foreign civilization.

Outside readings in English are especially useful during the pre-reading, aural-oral phase of the first-level course, during which the foreign language texts are withheld from the students. Outside readings can be assigned in lieu of the foreign language homework which can be assigned only when basic textbooks have been distributed. The social, political, religious, and economic life of the countries being studied, the daily living habits and customs, foods, education, art and music can all be read about profitably. Similarities between the foreign culture and our American culture should be studied. The students should not be exposed to just the differences nor should they be left with outdated or even erroneous stereotyped conceptions, such as "Mexicans wear sarapes," "France is primarily a nation of small farmers," "All Chinese are rice-eaters." We Americans are often amused and sometimes dismayed when foreigners, judging us by Hollywood movies and television shows, feel that every American is either a cowboy or a gangster and that every American father is a simpleton. Thus, through a carefully selected booklist, we must see to it that our students do not develop similar gross misconceptions about the foreign country we are studying.

Although written book reports may be required, other techniques can be used to test or to check outside reading. Panel discussions and oral reports in English can be effective, but they should be used rather sparingly. To have frequent or lengthly panel discussions takes valuable class time that should be devoted to practice in speaking and understanding the foreign language.

Outside reading at the advanced level should be entirely in the foreign language. Students should be expected to derive the meaning of most new words from contextual aids and should be expected to

read the foreign language directly, without decoding and translation. At this level, reading should not be of the "belles lettres" type, since students do not yet possess a command of the language that would enable them to be aware of style. Readings should be mainly from modern authors to give the students further practice with current vocabulary and grammatical usage and to provide additional insight into the contemporary society.

A written book report need not deal with just the plots; students can obtain digests of plots and write a report without reading the book. An analysis of one of the main characters may be more suitable. This could be done by having the students write answers to a series of questions based upon the particular book he has read. Reports should be written in class so that students may get help from the teacher and so that they may not resort to translating into the foreign language an English version they may have written out. Such a practice leads to anglicisms in structure and content.

Oral reports, on the other hand, may be very valuable. The entire class is involved and listening comprehension is developed. When several students have read a given book, a panel discussion may be held. The teacher may help the panel members to get ready for the discussion by giving them a list of topics or questions. A skit based upon some incident in the book can be written and performed by the pupils.

Caution must be exercised by the teacher when a book report is assigned. If there is too long a time before the due date, the students may fall into the "mañana" philosophy and postpone the reading until the very last moment. Sufficient time, however, must be given to enable the students to read at a comfortable pace.

Social Studies Book Reports

JOSEPH PECORARO, *State Supervisor of Social Studies*

Pupils read for two purposes: for information and enjoyment. Much of the reading in social studies is for information. Outside reading should be incorporated into the social studies unit as an important part of it. Time should be allowed in class for pupils to read for pleasure.

We should make reports meaningful. Once students have read a book, they often are faced with the book report that *insists* they pick the bones of what they have just read. No teacher is promoting the cause of reading if he asks his students for a dreary, involved analysis of a book that has been an enjoyable experience.

Suggestions for meaningful reports might be:

1. the diary of a major character
2. dramatization
3. reporter at the scene
4. preview of coming attraction
5. quiz program
6. group performance in the style of a contemporary TV program

Outside Reading
In Relation To The Science Programs

DONALD W. ROBINSON, *State Supervisor of Science*

Supplemental reading assignments are essential to the development of a top notch science program. There are several considerations that buttress my thinking on this subject which I offer for your consideration.

For many years the science curriculum has tended toward the development of compartments of science knowledge. We have classified ideas and information and tucked them into little capsules called biology, chemistry, or physics. Actually, it is almost as though we have said that this body of knowledge is strictly the province of physics, that body of knowledge the province of chemistry; yet the vast majority of science teachers recognize the artificiality of such compartmentalization. Supplemental or enrichment reading assignments are simply additional tools that the informed teacher uses to break down these false barriers and to emphasize the web-like interconnecting links existing between all of the so-called science disciplines. These assignments not only point up the interdisciplinary nature of science, but also stimulate the student's interest, extend his horizons in respect to the role science plays in his daily life, and provides much needed information that may stimulate him to think of a career in some phase of science.

There are other advantages derived from a supplemental reading program. Youngsters develop a great depth of understanding in the topic areas in which they read. There are frequently carry-over values that improve literacy in other areas closely allied to the sciences; students gain proficiency in the art of retrieving information from the library; the teacher can more effectively provide for individual differences in reading levels, interests, and comprehension of printed material; and, frequently the student picks up ideas that stimulate his thinking and lead to original investigation on his part. Since he learns to devise ways and means for testing his ideas, he proves to himself that science can be not only absorbing but rewarding.

The teacher has definite responsibilities associated with any supplemental program of this nature, however. He should prepare a book list that will give basic information (i.e. titles, authors, brief summary of content, reading level and interest level). He needs to know his

students well, their reading ability, and their interests. He should encourage his students to develop a diversified reading program at their reading level, gradually increasing the level of the reading material as the student is capable of progressing. Evaluation should be accomplished via an oral discussion period with the youngsters whenever possible. I have frequently worked with small groups in this manner and find the students often stimulate each other through this discussion device to gain insights into what the author is trying to say. Some of the author's ideas might remain hidden in a written report, where this interplay of minds is not encouraged. The teacher must be reasonable in the amount of supplemental reading required. Many students carry a heavy load of outside reading from other subjects and there is a limit to what the student can do and do well. I see little reason why teachers should not allow a student to use a book for a report in science and the same book for an English assignment, if the book meets the objectives or requirements established for the respective courses.

Elementary teachers should make wide use of outside reading to reinforce classroom teaching. Quite often, outside reading can supplement instruction in a classroom lacking adequate facilities for teaching science.

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